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SOCIAL THOUGHT IN THE CURRENT SHORT STORY

BY

ELVA E. MURRAY, A.B.

*Graduate Student in Sociology, 1916-17, University
of Southern California*

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OUTLINE.

1. Classification of subject matter upon analysis of 432 current short stories.
2. Five types of sociological short stories, dealing with the following topics:
 - (1) Health in relation to the worker.
 - (2) Strife between capital and labor.
 - (3) The immigration problem.
 - (4) Eugenics, or the importance of heredity.
 - (5) Portrayal of the social life of groups.
3. Significance of social thought in the short story.

I.

The short story, as a form of literary expression, developed in America. It is spontaneous and not restricted; consequently, it may present facts and ideas as they are. For this reason it is peculiarly adapted to present a social problem and a solution therefor without delay.

That a great many modern short story writers have chosen themes of a social nature for their stories, may be shown by a classification of short stories from current magazines, according to subject matter. These fall, I find, into the following types: the story

*(Editor's note.) This monograph represents a section of the work done by Miss Murray when a member of the sociology seminar (1916-17); it represents a pioneer effort in a new field. At the Bakersfield High School, for the second semester of this year (1917-18), Miss Murray will teach the course in high school sociology.

of adventure, the humorous story, the character story, the sociological story, and the love story; by a love story, I mean the type where the predominating interest is love, not where love merely enters.

From the *Century Magazine*, *Everybody's*, *Harpers*, the *American*, *McClure's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Seven Arts Magazine*, *Scribner's*, *Collier's*, and the *Metropolitan*, 432 stories published within the last three years and chosen at random were reviewed. Of these, 214 were of the type in which the predominating theme was love, sixty-nine were stories of adventure, fifty-nine were sociological, fifty-eight were character studies and thirty-two were of the humorous class. It was interesting to note that in the book, "The Best Short Stories of 1916," edited by Edward J. O'Brien, three of these sociological short stories appeared.

That our best short story writers are choosing social themes may be shown by a study of a group of modern writers. The writers in this group were selected as being the best modern short story writers, by two English professors, two Oratory professors, and three Oratory and English "majors".² The list is as follows: Rudyard Kipling, Booth Tarkington, Finley Peter Dunne, Joseph Lincoln, O. Henry, Myra Kelley, Bruno Lessing, Joseph Conrad, Jack London, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Ruth McEvery Stuart, Richard Harding Davis, Anton Tchekhov, Katherine Fullerton Gerould, James Francis Dwyer, and Fannie Hurst. In reviewing the best known stories of these writers, I found that twelve of them had written stories of the sociological type; in several cases the writers were well known for their social thought.

II.

The thought of the fifty-nine sociological short stories falls into five classes. The first class I have called—Health in relation to the worker; the second—Strife between capital and labor; third—Immigration problems; fourth—Eugenics, or the importance of heredity; and fifth—that type which portrays classes or nationalities for the purpose of giving the reader a better understanding of that group as a social unit.

² University of Southern California.

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(1) Of the first class, an excellent example is found in the story by Fannie Hurst entitled "T. B."³ It is the story of a shop girl, Sara Juke, working in the basement of a department store at six dollars a week. Not only is she working under unhygienic conditions, but she must return at night to a room in a tenement where pure air is unknown. These conditions, together with the lint from the cotton goods where she works, have resulted in a case of tuberculosis. However, Sara does not know what the various symptoms signify, and because she is young she manages to continue in spite of the disease. Her roommate and co-worker, Hattie Krakow, who is ten years older, tells her one day that she believes Sara has "T. B". But since neither of them know what to do, Sara becomes weaker and the cough grows worse. One evening on her way home from a dance where she had fainted, she notices a lighted storefront and the sign, "Free Tuberculosis Exhibit—to Educate People to Prevent Consumption." She begs her companion to take her in, and there learns the causes and symptoms of the great white plague, as well as the proper treatment. The next day she returns alone to the clinic where she receives pamphlets and circulars, and consults with the attending physician who later secures for her a position where she may work under healthful conditions, and a room where she may breathe pure air. At the clinic, she also meets a young man who tells her his story of being cured and who takes her into the country where she sees grass and flowers and trees for the first time in her life.

The story is most interesting; the character portrayal is excellent; the conversations are entertaining; the plot is simple and carefully worked out and involves one main problem and its solution. The facts presented are sound and the development of the free clinic idea is practical in all respects.

(2) Jack London has written a great many stories which fall in the second class,—dealing with the strife between capital and labor. Perhaps the best sample is his story entitled, "The Dream of Debs".⁴ The story is laid in San Francisco and opens with a picture of a general strike. A man awakened in the morning to find that all cars had ceased running, that deliveries were stopped, that the servants had gone, and that there was only the morning

³ Saturday Evening Post, January 9, 1915.

paper, which announced that a general strike had been called all over the United States.

The time of the story is supposed to be thirty years after the death of Samuel Gompers, and after the American Federation of Labor has gone out of existence. Gone also is Debs, with his revolutionary ideas and dreams of a general strike.

That morning the employing class go out in search of food and candles, for the lights of the city have been turned off. They find that the larger shops are closed and the smaller ones almost sold out, that the working class had been craftily laying in private stocks of provisions for months past, and that the telegraph and postal service had been stopped in order to make it impossible to obtain help from the outside.

An interesting part of the strike was the order which was maintained at all times, making it impossible for the troops at the Presidio to molest the strikers. The whole class of working people were enjoying the situation immensely. Employers could see their former employees sitting on their front porches with their families while the employers were walking about in search of food, or holding meetings to pass resolutions which could not be printed.

Finally, a result of one of the meetings was to have General Folsom take military possession of the wholesale houses and of all of the flour, grain and food warehouses. It had by this time become necessary for such measures to be taken, for suffering from hunger was becoming acute, and bread lines had to be established. But with the formation of bread lines came new troubles, for there was only a small reserve of bread in San Francisco, which at the best could not last long.

With the diminution of the food supply, order was passing away, and violence was becoming prevalent among the upper classes; they were conducting themselves in exactly the same manner as had the working classes during the old striking regime. An interesting account is given of a party of millionaires on a cow-stealing expedition, who were caught, beaten and relieved of their spoils by a group of hungry professional men who were on a like expedition.

*From *Strength of the Strong*.

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The organization of labor at this time is called the I. L. W., who issue a proclamation that reads as follows:

"We have maintained an orderly strike and we shall maintain order to the end. The end will come when our demands are satisfied, and our demands will be satisfied when we have starved our employers into submission, as we ourselves in the past have often been starved into submission".

In a few days, after many deaths have been caused by violence and hunger, the upper classes submit and the strike is called off providing that all members of the I. L. W. are reinstated in their old positions and that all laborers unite with the I. L. W. The story points out the horror of a general strike and concludes by stating that the brain of man should be capable of running industry in a more rational way.

While the story has little merit as a short story and is not constructive, yet, it has a social value; it creates a sympathy and understanding of the working class by showing that the same weaknesses are present in the employing class when placed under the same conditions as those of the working class; it emphasizes the importance of the great mass of workers.

Another of London's stories, entitled "South of the Slot," also illustrates the strife between capital and labor.⁵ The scene of the story is also laid in San Francisco and has for its hero, Freddie Drummond, Professor of Sociology in the University of California. The Slot was an iron crack that ran along the center of Market Street from which arose the burr of the ceaseless, endless cable that was hitched at will to the cars that dragged it up and down. North of the Slot were the theatres, hotels, and shopping district, the banks and the respectable business houses; south of the Slot were the factories, slums, laundries, machine shops, and the abodes of the working class. The Slot was the metaphor that expressed the class cleavage of society, and no man crossed the metaphor, back and forth, more successfully than Freddie Drummond. As a professor of Sociology he decided to live for a time south of the Slot to learn how "the other half lives".

The product of his first six months of life spent there was a book, "The Unskilled Laborer." It was received as an able con-

⁵ From *Strength of the Strong*.

tribution to the literature of progress, and had a large sale, especially among the employing classes. It was orthodox, both politically and economically, and was a splendid reply to the literature of discontent.

Freddie Drummond finds it difficult at first to get along with the working people. They are suspicious of him, and especially after an incident in the Milmax Cannery, they are angry with him. He is put to work here making boxes, not at skilled labor but at unskilled piecework. Other men on the same job are earning a dollar and seventy-five cents a day, and after a few days he is able to do as well. However, after keying himself up to an exhausting high-tension, he finds after a few weeks that he can make as much as two and one-half dollars a day. His fellow workmen favor him with scowls and black looks, and make remarks about "getting in" with the boss and "pace-making". He is in turn astonished at their malingering on "time-work" and at their inherent laziness. Their attitude toward him is becoming worse, when he is accosted by them and ordered to ease down his pace. He replies with a dissertation about freedom of contract, independent Americanism, and the dignity of toil; the result of which is a fierce battle in which Drummond receives injuries that keep him in bed for a week and cause him to lose his job. All of which is narrated in his book in the chapter on "The Tyranny of Labor".

His second book, "The Toiler", appears after added experiences. But, as time passes, he finds himself more frequently crossing the Slot and losing himself south of Market Street. His holidays are spent there, and he finds the time spent there valuable and even enjoyable. His third book, "Mass and Master", becomes a textbook in American universities, and still a fourth, "The Fallacy of the Inefficient", is well under way.

Previous to this time the hero has taken the name of Bill Totts; he finds rare enjoyment in being called "Big" Bill Totts by his fellow workmen. Everybody likes him now, and more than one working girl has fallen in love with him. At first he was merely a good actor, but as time goes on, simulation becomes second nature and he no longer plays a part. From doing the thing for the need's sake, he comes to do the thing for the thing's sake. He regrets the time that he must spend in the lecture room,

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and as Bill Totts, comes to anticipate the many things that Freddie Drummond would never have done.

At this time he makes a strange discovery, that Freddie Drummond and Bill Totts are two totally different creatures. The desires, tastes and impulses of each run counter to those of the other. Bill Totts could shirk a job with clear conscience, while Freddie Drummond condemned shirking as vicious, criminal, and un-American. Freddie Drummond did not care for dancing while Bill Totts never missed a night. Bill Totts cared for the girls and the girls for him, while Freddie Drummond openly opposed equal suffrage and co-education.

Bill Totts, though, is a thorough workman, as class-conscious as the average of his kind, whose hatred for a "scab" even exceeded that of the average loyal union-man. "Big" Bill belongs to the Longshoremen's Union and is always to the front when trouble is brewing. "It is Freddie Drummond, unapproachably clothed, seated at his study desk or facing his class in 'Sociology 17', who saw Bill Totts and all around the whole scab and union labor problem and its relation to the economic welfare of the United States in the struggle for the world market."

In gathering material for his next book, "Work and Women", he receives his first warning of danger; he realizes that this strange dualism is very unstable and cannot endure. He must inevitably drop one world or another, and as he looks at the rows of volumes, beginning with his Master's Thesis in Sociology and ending with his "Women and Work", he decides that that is the world he must choose. Bill Totts must cease. Freddie Drummond's fright is due to Mary Condon, President of the International Glove Workers' Union; Bill Totts has fallen in love with her.

But, as Freddie Drummond, he determines to marry Catherine Van Vorst, daughter of the only wealthy member of the faculty, and plans are completed for the wedding. A few days previous to the wedding, however, when he and Miss Van Vorst are riding down Market Street in her automobile, they run into a blockade caused by the men in a meat strike. Windows are being broken, men are seriously injured. Freddie Drummond watches the brutal fighting quite composedly, but looking out of Freddie Drummond's eyes there is the former Bill Totts; somewhere back of those eyes

battling for the control of their mutual body, are Freddie Drummond, the sane and conservative sociologist, and Bill Totts, the class-conscious union workman. Bill Totts wins, and in a few moments is in the thick of the battle; soon the crowd is recognizing its champion and cheers are going up for "Big" Bill. Mary Condon is there, too; and when the struggle is over she and Bill go away together. A postscript to the story states that no more lectures are given by Freddie Drummond at the University of California, and no more books on the labor question appear in his name; but that a new labor leader, William Totts, has become known, who is to marry Mary Condon, President of the International Glove Workers' Union.

While the story presents but one side of the labor problem in a way that is greatly overdrawn, yet the reader gains a clearer insight to the problem. He cannot help but have a keener sympathy for the working class. The justification of labor unions is satisfactory and the discussions of the weapons of these organizations are comprehensive. The influence of environment upon the individual is clearly brought out; this is one of the most important sociological ideas that is developed.

(3) A good illustration of the third type of social thought is a story by James Francis Dwyer, "The Citizen".⁶ The story opens with an address by the President of the United States who is speaking to an audience of 2000 foreign-born men who have just been admitted to citizenship. They are listening intensely; their faces are upturned to the speaker, and are aglow with the light of a new-born patriotism.

One little woman is sitting immediately in front of the President, holding the hand of her husband. He is a big man with the eyes of a dreamer and as the President's words come clear and distinct he listens intently. The President is saying, "you were drawn across the ocean by some beckoning finger of hope, by some belief, by some vision of a new kind of justice, by some expectation of a better kind of life. You dreamed dreams of this country, and I hope you brought the dreams with you. A man enriches the country to which he brings dreams, and you who have brought them have enriched America. No doubt, you have been disappointed in

⁶ Collier's Weekly, November 20, 1915.

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some of us, but remember this, if we have grown at all poor in the ideal, you brought some of it with you. A man does not go out to seek the thing that is not in him. A man does not hope for the thing that he does not believe in, and if some of us have forgotten what America believed in, you at any rate imported in your hearts a renewal of the belief. Each of you, I am sure, brought a dream, a glorious shining dream, a dream worth more than gold or silver, and that is the reason that I, for one, make you welcome."

The big man's eyes become fixed for he is looking through the presidential rostrum and out over leagues of space to a small Russian village. Big Ivan Berloff had had his dream in this village—his dream of America—and it was there that he and his wife had been working and saving that their dream might be realized. After much labor, many hardships, untold difficulties in getting out of Russia, and horror of the steerage on the great emigrant ship, they had arrived in America and now with the President's address the dream seemed about to come true.

As Ivan is living over again the experiences that had come from his dream, the President is nearing the close of his address, and Ivan comes out of the trance which the President's words had brought upon him. He sits up and listens intently: "We grow great by dreams. All big men are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day, or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let those great dreams die but others nourish and protect them, nurse them through bad days till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true." The President finishes and for a moment looks down at the faces turned up to him. Ivan, seizing Anna's hand and holding tight, cries, "He knew of my dream."

The story is very well written. The description of the steerage scene and Ellis Island is exceptionally good. And the characters are well drawn. The story leaves the reader in close sympathy with the immigrant and the President's speech sets a new ideal for Americans in relation to its new citizens.

(4) Of the fourth class of social thought, namely, Eugenics and the importance of heredity,—the story called "The Dominant

Strain," by Katharine Fullerton Gerould, is an example.⁷ While the plot of the story has little social significance, discussions of Eugenics are introduced, some laws of heredity are presented, and the "Kallikak Family" is mentioned as being a good primer for the student of Eugenics. Included also in the story is a description of a model orphans' home; one that is to be a real home, not the old type asylum. Uniforms for the children are to be abolished; the children are to be taught to work as well as play in a scientific manner.

(5) Of the fifth class, which is by far the largest, there are several sub-types.

Anton Tchekhov has written a great many short stories, as well as plays, dealing with the life of the Russian middle class. He presents problems, customs and the sins of this class of society in a most detailed manner.

O. Henry in his best known stories has drawn a vivid picture of urban social life and problems, and has presented in a very entertaining manner the problems peculiar to city life. There is no reader of O. Henry's two books of short stories, "The Four Million" and "The Trimmed Lamp" who does not have a warm sympathy for and a kindly understanding of the city dweller in America.

A story of this type that portrays modern tenement life and its problems is, "The Guilty Party", from the volume, "The Trimmed Lamp." O. Henry presents the picture of a slovenly-kept tenement home, the father of the family an unshaven and untidy man with his face buried in the evening paper, the mother drudging in the kitchen; and their child Lizzie, driven to the streets of the East Side, to play in the "Corridors of the House of Sin", grows up in a vicious environment, commits a crime, and ends her own life. The story is in the characteristic, entertaining style of O. Henry. It is told in simple language, a very clear picture is drawn, and the reader does not lay the story aside without giving it a serious thought.

Bruno Lessing writes, as do many others, of New York's East Side and especially of the Russian Jews.

A writer who portrays the life of the immigrant child, especially of the Jewish child, is Myra Kelley. In her book of short

⁷ From *The Great Tradition*; and in Scribner's, June, 1914.

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stories entitled "Little Aliens" she has written entertaining sketches. The stories of these "little aliens" take place in Miss Bailey's first grade classroom, and an opportunity is given to emphasize the importance of the public school in making useful citizens of the immigrants in our country. She also points out the necessity for the home and school to work together for the good of the child, with the fact in view that, "A sound mind in a sound body is more to be valued than riches; that a keen eye for color and form, a steady hand to guide a pencil or tool; a mind alert, eager and reasonable; a heart which feels its brotherhood with all living, growing things; a free, frank speech; a generous nature, and an honest tongue are in themselves a Declaration of Independence and a Psalm of Life." These stories by Myra Kelley suggest a wide range of possibilities for the Jewish child, and develop in the reader a love for and understanding of him.

III.

The significance of the social thought in the short story is found not so much in the solution of problems as in the presenting of facts or in the portraying of social conditions to the short story reading public, in a descriptive way.

I think that it is safe to say that of all forms of literature the short story is the most widely read. Classes of people read the short story who never look into the reports of our social service commissions and health bureaus, into articles in sociological, economics, or educational magazines, or into books written entirely upon those subjects. By reading short stories of this type, the reader is unconsciously educated upon social questions, and in him there is developed, to some degree, a social mind. Indirect suggestion operates powerfully. If the short story succeeds in accurately and stimulatingly presenting facts concerning a social problem, the reader has gained more than if he has studied social dogma, with rules and solutions already worked out. He will be constrained to assume a sociological viewpoint, and to work out or to assist others in working out sociological solutions.

Since the short story readers outnumber the actual students of sociology a hundred to one, the sociological short story is in a position to carry social truths to a hundred minds that otherwise would

not be reached. Some of its possibilities in this direction are indicated by this study, which, however, is purely introductory.

In summary: the short story is peculiarly adapted for the conveyance of sociological truths because a whole set of facts can be put forth in a well-rounded way to the reader at a single sitting; the methods of the short story are the effective ones of description and indirect suggestion; the field is that which includes millions of readers weekly who are intelligent, but who are not students of academic sociology.